

FUNCTIONAL SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS IN THE FIELD OF ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM. CASE STUDY: HARGHITA AND NEAMȚ COUNTIES

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Abstract

Nowadays, one cannot talk about an authentic rural tourism within a certain destination without emphasizing the local cultural heritage (cultural landscape, customs and traditions, gastronomy and so on). In the existing context, the local gastronomy is perceived as a marketing instrument efficient in differentiating the rural touristic destinations. A special place in the development of the traditional cuisine is represented by the setting up and the promotion of the short food supply chains which can be achieved by sustaining the small local producers and by putting into practice an environment-friendly traditional agriculture. Sustaining the partnerships between the owners of accommodation units and the small local agricultural producers represents an essential element in putting into practice a sustainable and qualitative rural tourism. Romania has a substantial potential as regards the enhancement of short food supply chains thanks to: the large number of semi-subsistence agricultural farms (with an area under 5 hectares), the „village-town connection” as regards the food procurement, especially from acquaintances and relatives and the carrying on of a traditional agriculture at a large scale in the rural households. The case studies emphasized in the current paper (Harghita and Neamț Counties) focus on the existence of short food supply chains, functional in the rural tourism sector under very different ways: touristic sheepfolds, trout farms, inns, authentic holiday villages, peasant guest houses etc.

Key words: short food supply chains, agri-food sector, local gastronomy, rural tourism

JEL Classification: L83, L66, O13, D71

I. INTRODUCTION

One can see, by consulting dedicated literature, that there is no unanimously accepted definition of the short food supply chain concept. Thus, a state of fact results by which the concept is often misused. Well known authors, on the other hand, consider that the notion refers to the various manners of selling agri-food products, in such a way that the number of links in the logistical supply chain is reduced (only 1 intermediary) and/also the geographic distance (at most 50/80/120 km away from the production site; the criteria differs from country to country) between the effective production site and the end consumer is also diminished (Marechal, 2008; Aubry and Chiffolleau 2009, p.55; Tanasă, 2015, p.199).

According to UK's Soil Association (2001), the short food supply chain is defined as „A system of producing, processing and trading, primarily of organic and sustainable forms of food production, where the physical and economic activity is largely contained and controlled within the locality or region where it was produced, which delivers health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the communities in those areas” (Kneafsey, Venn et al., 2013, p.27; Tanasă, 2014, p.186).

Therefore, the short food supply chains (SFSCs) generate economic, social, environment and health benefits not only for the rural communities but also for the tourists: new local job opportunities in the agri-food and tourism sectors, fostering the knowledge/information transfer, a higher employment rate in rural areas, counteracting the external migration and gentrification phenomena, sustaining the local services and suppliers, increase the local money absorption, improvement of population's wellness by assuring access to healthier food, increase of social interaction between small producers and final consumers/tourists, encouraging farmers to adopt more environment-friendly production systems (traditional agriculture) and others (Tanasă, 2014, pp.191-192).

SFSCs are an alternative to long globalised food chains and play an increasingly important role in food supply networks. Are very varied in nature and practice and exist all over the world in a wide variety of forms, in both commercial and non-commercial settings (Galli and Brunori, 2013, pp.9-10). These are based on a large range of producers, their origin can be easily verified by the final consumer and they present a higher degree of flexibility and capacity of adjusting to new situations and clients' expectances.

The cultural heritage represents an important source for the regional and local enhancement, the symbolic capital being essential for identifying the cultural identity represented by values, customs and occupations, beliefs and symbols shared by the local community. The expression of the cultural identity, of traditions and customs is influenced by the region, which represents more than a geographical location. Rural heritage protection is extremely important from the perspective of rural tourism development, as modality to promote the traditional village, with a positive effect on attracting tourists and with economic benefits for the local population (Tanasă, 2014, p.182).

II. FUNCTIONAL SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS IN HARGHITA AND NEAMȚ COUNTIES FROM A TOURISM SECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

In the developed countries of the European Union, SFSCs have been rediscovered in the last 20 years and they are considered innovative solutions for promoting healthy food and for the sustenance of the local agriculture but also for the long-term development of the rural communities. Instead, for certain emergent countries of the European Union (Romania including), under the communist regime, SFSCs represented useful "crisis" solutions for the urban population and they were also seen as efficient solutions for the survival of the local small farmers (Tanasă, 2015, p.216).

There are well-known turistical and transit areas in Neamț and Harghita Counties renowned local cuisine. The latter was in time influenced by climate, relief, soil quality, local customs and traditions etc. Thus are worth mentioning the following aspects regarding local cuisine:

- The renowned the potatoe quality from Giurgeu Depression and/or Ciuciul de Jos microregion;
- Bakery produce from Harghita County (for example, potatoe based Szekler bread, Szekler pound cake/ kürtőskalács), small local bakeries and vendors are largely present (44 functional bakeries recorded in the first part of 2015);
- Numerous trout fisheries on Bistrița Valley (Borca, Fărcașa, Sabasa, Ceahlău, Durău, Poiana Teiului, Potoci, Izvorul Muntelui, Biczaz sau Bicazu Ardelean – Neamț County);
- Mineral springs in Harghita County have curative properties; local brands like Borsec, Tușnad, Stânceni, Perla Harghitei, Biborțeni, Spring Harghita/ Mineral Quantum, are known at a national/international level;
- Belgian endives farming in Săbăoani – Gherăiești – Tupilați area;
- Cattle raising in Târgu-Neamț area (numerous cattle farms); the area is well-known for its milk and dairy products;
- Sheep raising and multiple shepherd's huts in Bistrița Valley, region well-known for its sheep and cattle based milk and dairy products; recent homologation and the certification of the shepherd's huts in Neamț and Harghita Counties has led to small number of those being included in touristical circuits (Crucea Arsă - Popești or Trei Fântâni/Haromkut - Trei Fântâni).
- Forest fruit gathering and picking (blackberries, blueberries, red raspberries, cranberries etc.); wild mushroom collecting in rocky areas of Neamț (Borca, Pîpirig) and Harghita Counties (Gheorgheni);
- Cattle and sheep raising (milk and dairy products; meat products) in hill side and mountainous areas of Harghita County (Toplița, Tulgheș, Borsec, Bilbor, Sâncrăieni, Valea Strâmbă);
- Small-scale beekeeping represents an old custom which can be still found in Harghita and Neamț Counties; the producers are organised as authorized private persons and individual enterprises, a lot of them practicing pastoral beekeeping.

Harghita County – rural tourism and short food supply chains

From the perspective of the accommodation structures, it can be noticed the existence of numerous guest houses, touristic and agro-touristic boarding houses (many accommodation structures have Dacian bathrooms, saunas, choke dams, salt mines – specific to local tourism). The specific traditional Szekler gates, identifying element of the Szeklers, have a special significance for the rural communities in Harghita County and represent an attraction for the tourists. Only in Satu Mare and Corund there are hundreds of Szekler gates.

There are excellent relationships with Hungary, the largest rate of the Hungarian tourists that visit Romania coming mainly in this region (Harghita, Mureș and Covasna Counties). It worth being mentioned that the Hungarian tourists have played in the last 25 years an extremely important role in the development of the tourism in a wide variety of forms (curative tourism, cultural tourism, food and gastronomic tourism, bike tourism etc.) and in reaching high quality standards for the touristic services in the area. But also, in the last years, it can be identified a constant increase of the Romanian tourists number who, in most of the cases, visit the well-known touristic destinations (resorts of regional and national interest), being attracted by the competitive

prices, the quality and the diversity of the touristic services, but mainly by the natural patrimony of the county and its curative valences.

Moreover, it worth being mentioned the county strategy regarding the touristic development in Harghita which is well-implemented and respected, mainly in the resorts and locations of touristic interest. The natural patrimony of the county is impressive, with numerous mineral waters, choke dams, salt mines, gorges, an important forest area, numerous swamps, thermal springs and so on. The sites of communitarian importance, such as Roșu Lake, Hașmaș Mountain, Bicăz Gorges, Sfânta Ana Lake or Mohoș Swamp are only some examples of natural elements of touristic attraction.

Moreover, the wealthy anthropic patrimony as, on the whole, the traditional architecture is well-preserved. There are prospering localities, in most of the cases situated along the main roads which are in a permanent development (for example, Corund, Borzont, Izvoru Mureșului or Zetea) but there are also villages isolated from the road infrastructure (such as, Șiclod, Covacipeter, Atia or Atid), in a continuous process of depopulation, but which are considered real “open-space museums”, thanks to their well-preserved traditional houses. It can be identified an intense activity of the non-governmental organizations implicated both in the promotion and preservation of the local traditions, and in the touristic promotion of the area.

In the last 25 years, the tourism in Harghita County has had a sinusoidal route, from the decaying of a series of national-interest resorts to their reconstruction (for example, Sovata, Borsec or Băile Tușnad) and also to the development of new touristic micro-regions. Moreover, it worth being mentioned that this region has an old tradition as regards spa and treatment resorts (Harghita Mădăraș, Băile Tușnad, Borsec, Praid, Harghita-Băi, Sântimbru-Băi and so on). There have also been set up new touristic areas (Borzont, Zetea – Subcetate or Corund).

As regards the winter sports, Harghita County owns a skiing area with development potential, and it measured all together in 2014 approx. 10 km of ski slope, the most significant of them being situated in Harghita-Băi, Harghita Mădăraș, Tușnad, Toplița-Borsec, Balványos, Izvorul Mureșului, Bucin, Ciumani and Băile Homorod resorts.

In the rural tourism within Harghita County, there are short food supply chains under different forms:

1. In guest houses, in most of the cases, the food is assured from the hosts’ own production or supplied thanks to local “partnerships” (symbolically speaking) with other households in the area. A relevant example in this respect is *Casa țărănească Irénke (Irénke Peasant House)* in Bisericani/ *Casa țărănească Zsuzsanna (Zsuzsanna Peasant House)* in Praid, where almost all the food is produced and prepared by the hosts, existing also agreements with other households in the village for its procurement.

2. There are beneficiaries that offer only accommodation services in restored traditional houses with no possibility of serving meals, but the tourists are redirected to other local restaurants and inns which offer autochthonous products and even to other accommodation units in the area.

3. There are organized short food supply chains between the boarding houses owners and the local producers (such as, *Satul de vacanță Boros – Boros Holiday Village* in Lunca de Jos which offers the tourists “*Bunătați din Secuime*” – “*The Szekler Goodies*” produced by SC Authentic Meat Ltd. in Gheorgheni). The agri-food products can be either directly delivered by the small producers, or purchased “from the farm’s gate” or can be bought from the producers’ stores (butchers, local multi-label stores, groceries etc.).

4. There are local entrepreneurs that developed autochthone trademarks and who also diversified their businesses in the touristic field. A relevant example in this respect is represented by *Villa Honor* in Izvoare, known among the passionate hunters (and not only them), where the tourists are offered their own *Honor* products (prepared out of game meat).

5. There are lodges that can be “turnkey” rent. In this sense, it can be mentioned *Moșia Bunicului Guest House*, Lupeni, *Korona Peasant House*, Sub Cetate or *Crossline Lodge*, Gheorgheni.

6. There are authentic mills (*La Făgădău Mill*, Băile Tușnad) or local specialties inns (*Halászcsárda Fishing Inn*, Câmpu Cetății, *Hotarul Ciucului Inn* and *Hanul Secuiesc – The Szekler Inn*, Băile Tușnad) appreciated for the diversity of the local gastronomy offered to the tourists.

An efficient bridge between the rural tourism and the local agri-food producers is represented by the promotion and the enhancement of the gastronomic routes. In the last years, in Harghita tourism there have been initiated and promoted the following roads: *The Mineral Waters Road* – promoted by means of two projects with European funding, *The Salt Road* (www.repf.ro, 2015; www.judetulharghita.ro, 2015) and *The Fruits Road* (Barna, 2014).

From the accommodation units in Harghita County that promote the short food supply chains, we mention the examples below: Boros Holiday Village- Lunca de Jos, Zsuzsanna Peasant House– Praid, Tájház Boarding House– Bisericani, La Conac Guest House - Rugănești, Honor Villa – Izvoare, Moșia Bunicului Guest House– Lupeni, Moara La Făgădău Boarding House - Băile Tușnad, Halászcsárda Fishing Inn- Câmpu Cetății, Anna Boarding House - Borzont, Szekler Inn - Băile Tușnad, La Bunici Boarding House - Lacu Roșu, Irénke Peasant

House– Bisericani, Ábel Bölcsője Boarding House - Lupeni, Nagy LakTouristik Complex– Zetea, Anda Boarding House – Gheorgheni, Hovirag Boarding House – Borzont, Ajnad Boarding House – Nădejdea, Petho Boarding House - Hargita Mădăraş, Lakó Ferenc Guest House – Zetea, Korona Peasant House- Sub Cetate, Olga Boarding House – Zetea, Sziklakert Inn– Sâncrai, Edit Boarding House – Bisericani, Hotarul Ciucului Inn - Băile Tuşnad towards Bixad and Csango-Fatanyeros Boarding House - Lunca de Jos.

As concerns the local agri-food producers, according to ANSVSA Harghita, in 2015, there were registered 679 animal origin processing units and 341 non-animal origin processing/commercializing units, many of these using means of selling specific to SFSCs. Among the ones of animal origin, we mention: 19 meat shops, 21 butcheries, 5 wild game collecting centers, 49 milk processing centers within the farms, 1 independent milk processing center, 13 raw-milk selling jukeboxes, 5 fish farms and a fishery, 3 centers of honey and other apiculture products extraction/collection, 214 apiaries and 1 apiculture store, one egg collecting center, 189 restaurants/ fast-food-s/ fast-food caravans/ rotisseries, 11 pizzerias, 71 canteens, a confectionary and/or patisserie products laboratory, 2 confectionaries, 42 accommodation units, 17 furniture selling stores and 14 catering firms. As regards the non-animal origin units registered at ANSVSA, there have been identified: 15 bakeries, 44 bread making workshops, 153 cakes workshops, 5 milling factories, 9 pastries, pretzel making workshops – dry and canned products, 19 fruits and vegetables processing and canning units, 10 small factories for natural fruits and vegetables natural juices, 2 potatoes processing and preserving units, 5 units for cacao/chocolate and sugar products fabrication, 6 pasta small factories, 2 spices small factories, one unit for tee/coffee production, 2 units for other food products production, 33 units for the production of ethyl alcohol /distilled alcoholic beverages, one wine center, 2 beer factories, 7 ice-cream small factories, 6 units for the production of non-alcoholic fresh drinks, 7 factories for mineral and spring water bottling, 8 packing units and 4 mushroom farms (www.ansvsa.ro, 2015).

Regarding the promotion of the local products, in 2013, as an initiative of Harghita County Council and of Harghita Agricultural Chamber, it was created *The Agricultural Cooperative of Szekler Products/ Szekely Termek*, according to the old model of Ant Cooperative („Hangya”) and having as founder members 16 associations and 5 individual entrepreneurs. The main goal of this cooperative is the promotion of small food producers and local craftsmen, by creating a local umbrella trademark, which represents the farmers in the area. They opened their own store and also they monthly organize different fairs, festivals/other events with gastronomic profile for assuring the promotion of the *Szekler Product/ Szekely Termek* trademark (www.szekelytermek.ro, 2015).

As for the umbrella trademarks in Harghita County, another relevant example is *Gobe Termek* local brand, which brings together and represents more local producers of bakery, confectionary, pastry, dairy, meat, eggs and honey products (www.gobetermek.ro, 2012). This local brand is an initiative resulting from the local Szekler solidarity. It worth being mentioned that these producers, gathered under the protection of an umbrella trademark, succeeded together in opening their own stores (Odorheiu Secuiesc) and even to penetrate the market of the local supermakets (for e.g., *Merkur* chain of stores).

Altogether, it must be mentioned the initiative of *Transylvania Authentica*, a program of Foundation for Partnership (Miercurea Ciuc) which has as goal the perpetuation of the traditional farming, the culinary heritage and the specific of Transylvanian products and services by consolidating the relationships between the regional small producers and craftsmen. Transylvania Authentica trademark was registered at The State Office for Trademarks and Design and in 2013 the number of certified products and services exceeded 700 items (www.transylvania-authentica.ro, 2014).



Figure 1 - Associative forms/ umbrella trademarks in Harghita County

Neamț County – rural tourism and short food supply chains

By point of view of the accommodation units, one can notice that the boarding houses/restaurants with a recognized local gastronomy are placed in Neamț area generally both along the main communication roads (DN15, E85, DN12C and so on), and in the well-known touristic area (Piatra-Neamț, Durău, Ceahlău - Bicaz, Târgu-Neamț, Izvoru Muntelui, Tarcău or Valea Bistriței).

In 2015, the accommodation infrastructure was well represented (over 300 accommodation units), the main sources of tourists being Iași, Bacău and Piatra-Neamț municipalities. Most of the units are boarding houses and hotels, in Neamț County being a more reduced experience in the field of guest houses/peasant houses in comparison with Harghita County.

Cultural-religious tourism has a special importance in Neamț County as there are numerous churches and monasteries (especially in Târgu-Neamț touristic area), in the rural space the customs and traditions being well preserved, while the local architecture having suffered significant changes in the last 25 years.

In Neamț rural tourism exist short food supply chains under different forms:

1. In Neamț area exists an old tradition of trout fisheries, the mountain zone and the mountain waters offering a favorable climate for developing this type of business, Ceahlău-Bicaz, Bistrița Valley and Tarcău Valley touristic zones being ones of the most known in this respect. After 2000, a part of these classical trout fisheries extended their businesses in the field of gastronomy (for example, *Cheița Trout Fishery*, Bicaz or *Bistra Trout Fishery*) or even in the touristic field (*Leo Trout Fishery/ Boarding House* in Bicazu Ardelean, *Căprioara Trout Fishery/ Boarding House* in Borca and so on).

2. Recently, thanks to the homologation and the certification of the shepherd's huts, more administrators of touristic boarding houses have developed their businesses horizontally by setting up their own shepherd's huts (for e.g., *Teo Boarding House*, *Trei Fântâni* and *Haromkut Touristic shepherd's huts* or *Vânătorul Boarding House*, Durău and "*Crucea Arsă*" *Shepherd's Huts*, Fărcașa). In very few cases, it can be noticed the tendency of the accommodation units' administrators to diversify their activity by creating their own short food supply chains and products or even agri-food brands (*Vânătorul Boarding House*, Durău and *Hanul Ancuței Inn*, Tupilați).

3. There are entrepreneurs in the touristic sector who developed local trademarks and who created their own cuisine. A good example in this respect is represented by *Hanul Ancuței Inn* in Tupilați, the most well-known Moldavian inn, that developed its own trademark of canned fruit and vegetable (including locally cultivated endives), offering their tourists products from *Cămara Ancuței – Ancuța's Storeroom*. Hanul Ancuței Inn represents a functional short food supply chain, with a beautiful history connected to Mihail Sadoveanu's writings and who implemented over the cross of time a successful marketing.

4. In Neamț County there are few examples of accommodation units where the owners (of boarding houses in special) can recommend local trademarks, but they sustain the local gastronomy. This is because in Neamț County the local trademarks, existing in a reduced number, are not sufficiently promoted and the local producers have not yet signed 'partnerships' with the accommodation units in their area. The consecrated touristic zones (Târgu-Neamț, Piatra-Neamț and Ceahlău – Durău) have good potential, both as regards the number of small accommodation units and the number the local producers in the zootechnical field (meat and dairy products).

Some positive examples of accommodation units which are included in/use different types of short food supply chains in Neamț County are: Hanul Ancuței Inn– Tupilați, Vânătorul Boarding House – Durău (boarding house, trout fishery, small dairy farm), Crucea Arsă Touristic Shepherd's Hut – Popești, Teo Boarding House - Trei Fântâni, Trei Fântâni/Haromkut Touristic Shepherd's Hut, Leo Boarding House and Trout Fishery - Bicazu Ardelean, Căprioara Trout Fishery and Boarding House– Borca, Orizont Boarding House – Fărcașa, Popa Museum Târpești Bed&Breakfast – Târpești, Troian Boarding House - Alexandru cel Bun, Popasul Vânătorului Boarding House – Borca, Casa Drumețului Boarding House – Săvinești, Balad'or Boarding House – Pângărați, Cheița Trout Fishery– Bicaz, Total Boarding House – Ceahlău, Pădurea de Smarald Agro-touristic Complex– Agapia, Mariko Inn Complex – Roman, Miruna Boarding House – Răucești, Eden Boarding House – Agapia and Punguța cu Doi Bani Boarding House – Agapia.

As concerns the local agri-food industry, according to ANSVSA Neamț, in 2015, there were registered 1085 animal origin processing units and 171 non-animal origin processing/commercializing units, most of them using different means of selling specific to SFSCs. Among the ones of animal origin, we mention: 31 meat shops, 61 butcheries, one wild game collecting centers, 83 milk processing centers within the farms, 10 milk processing independent center, 15 raw-milk selling jukeboxes, 29 fisheries, 3 apiaries and 1 apiculture store, 577 restaurants/ fast-foods/ fast-food caravans/ rotisseries, 47 pizzerias, 112 canteens, 47 confectionaries and/or patisserie products laboratory, 61 accommodation units and 8 catering firms. As regards the non-animal origin units registered at ANSVSA, there have been identified: 66 bakeries, 3 bread making workshops, 34 cakes workshops, 18 milling factories, 11 pastries, pretzel making workshops – dry and canned products, 8 fruits and

vegetables processing and canning units, one oil factory, one sugar factory, one ethyl alcohol factory, one wine center, one small beer factory, one ice-cream factory, 3 factories for mineral and spring water bottling, 15 greengrocers, one small factory of frozen products and 6 mushroom farms (www.ansvsa.ro, 2015).

Along the county, there are numerous local meat and dairy producers (Târgu-Neamț, Piatra-Neamț, Roman, Bicaz – Ceahlău, Valea Bistriței areas), thanks to the favorable natural relief conditions and local microclimate, most of the units being of small dimensions, micro-farms type and small farms (small subsistence farms). Though, it can be noticed the presence of a series of large agricultural and zootechnical farms (*Agrosuind Com SRL, Suinprod SA sau Kosarom SA*), some being organized as holding (*Trei Brazi TCE*), their products being nationally recognized. An important role in feeding the local population (mainly the big towns) is played by the local meat shops and butchers, usually localized in the agri-food markets or in their proximity. With some exceptions (for e.g., *ExpoCarm, La Căpraru, Suinprod* meat shops) even these are small and are organized as authorized private person, individual enterprises, family enterprises and limited liability companies, according to partnerships with different persons in the area (semi-subsistent micro-farms).

The most part of the vegetables production is commercialized through intermediaries in the agri-food markets. Only a small part of the vegetables sold in agri-food markets and small neighborhood greengrocers are supplied by the farmers in the area. Though, during the last years, in the Eastern and the Southern part of the county, more and more vegetable farmers have invested in small-dimensioned seasonal vegetables greenhouses and they sell the production by means of short food supply chains.

The trout fisheries in Bicaz-Ceahlău, Bistrița Valley and Tarcău Valley mountain areas, favored by the mountain water quality, are known not only at county level, but are also being appreciated by the tourists visiting the Neamț area. These excepting, the little few fisheries in the zone – such as dams and ponds, sell their products in Piatra-Neamț by means of their own specialized stores or directly at the “farm’s gate”. Therewith, the apiculture sector also worth being mentioned, summing over 200 beekeepers organized as authorized private person and individual enterprises (www.proapicultura.ro, 2015).

Neamț zone in general and Târgu-Neamț area in particular are recognized for their chain of monasteries and hermitages, being very appreciated by the pilgrims. Also, there is a big concentration of accommodation units in the areas where there are situated the most important places of worship (Agapia, Văratec, Durău – resort, Petru-Vodă, Bistrița, Pângărați etc.). Most part of these monasteries (especially those of nuns – *Văratec, Agapia, Durău, Paltin/ Petru-Vodă*) also commercialize local products (*Durău* – pastry and confectionary products, syrup, comfiture, *Agapia* – sherbet, syrup, comfiture, phytotherapeutic products, *Văratec* – syrup, comfiture, *Petru-Vodă* – jam, comfiture, *Petru-Vodă* – mass wine, phytotherapeutic oils). Moreover, the monastery products are very reliable among the consumers and they have in the near future all the chances to become a regional brand.

Even though there are numerous qualitative agri-food products, the lack of umbrella trademarks in Neamț County, which to put together more local producers and the limited marketing for the agri-food product (in comparison with Harghita County) represent a genuine impediment in the enhancement of the local agri-food sector, with a significant growing potential and national recognition among the consumers.

III. CONCLUSION

The local agri-food products and trademarks, distributed by means of SFSCs, play an important role in the development of the local rural tourism, their promotion implicitly contributing to the improvement of the local image among the tourists. Practically, nowadays it is more and more difficult to talk about a sustainable rural tourism without the development of a series of local agri-food products/trademarks, certainly existing interdependence between them.

As regards the number of processing/commercializing units registered at ANSVSA, it can be noticed that Neamț County (with a total amount of 1256 animal and non-animal origin processing/commercializing units) is better represented than Harghita County (with 1020 animal and non-animal origin processing/commercializing units), but the efficient marketing (the more attractive branding, the existence of the umbrella trademarks, good visibility in the on-line environment) make the agri-food products in Harghita County to be more visible on the specific market at regional, and even national level (in the supermarkets including). Though, it must be underlined the fact that the greatest procent of the producers in Neamț County is mainly dedicated to the local consumers, respecting the principle of SFSCs.

The umbrella trademarks in Harghita, such as Szekler Product/ Szekely Termek, Gobe Termek and Transylvania Authentica have an important role in promoting the small local agri-food producers, in educating the population in the spirit of solidarity with the Szekler farmers, and also in the enhancement and sustenance of SFSCs. These are successful examples to be followed in order to develop the local small producers’ associative spirit.

In both counties there are numerous functional short food supply chains: selling at the farm's gate, selling along the main communication roads (done by the small farmers), in their own shops – as individual or associated producers (meat shops, butchers, groceries), in agri-food markets (limited by the large number of intermediaries), at fairs, festivals/other gastronomic events, deliveries assured by the producers and also on-line selling.

As for the rural tourism in Harghita and Neamț Counties, one can notice that the local qualitative gastronomy can be perceived as a real strong point for more and more accommodation units owners. There are a lot of boarding houses that expanded horizontally by creating their own micro-farms in the zootechnical/vegetable/fishing fields, creating their own SFSCs. Moreover, there were identified local agri-food producers that expanded their activity later on also in the touristic and food serving fields.

In the last years, along Harghita County there have appeared different local collaborations/partnerships between touristic entrepreneurs and local producers. The rural communities situated in the proximity of the main touristic sites or along the main roads transited by the tourists understood that the promotion altogether of tourism, local gastronomy and implicitly of the small farmers, under different forms, represent a genuine chance for a sustainable development of the community.

Even though there are numerous local qualitative agri-food products, the lack of umbrella trademarks in Neamț County, which to bring together more local producers and the existence of an insufficient marketing for the agri-food products (in comparison with Harghita County) represent a real impediment in the enhancement of the local agri-food sector, with a big growing potential and recognition among the consumers at regional level.

It is recommendable the development of new similar collaborations/partnerships in Neamț County too, especially in the consecrated touristic zones and appreciated for the local gastronomy: Târgu-Neamț, Ceahlău-Bicaz, Piatra-Neamț. A relevant example in this respect could be the signing of future partnerships between the monasteries in Neamț County (Agapia, Văratec, Durău, Paltin – Petru-Vodă) and the owners of boarding houses in Târgu-Neamț area.

Along with the development of the local gastronomy importance in choosing a Romanian touristic destination, the rural tourism can play an important role, inclusively in educating the Romanian consumers for embracing a healthier diet, increasing the feeling of attachment and solidarity with the local products and, implicitly, in promoting the small local agri-food producers.

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